DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 130 737 JC 760 620

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TITLE	Teaching and Counseling Older College Students.
INSTITUTION	Educational Testing Service, Princeton, N.J. Institutional Research Program for Higher Education.
PUB DATE	75
NOTE	5p.
JOURNAL CIT	Findings; v2 n1 1975
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Counseling; *Adult Students; Community Colleges; *Conventional Instruction; *Junior Colleges; Junior College Students; Older Adults; Participant Satisfaction; Questionnaires; *Student Attitudes; Student Characteristics; *Student Needs; Surveys; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Students 22 years of age and older clearly have counseling needs and instructional preferences that differ from those of college-age students. These conclusions were reached after a survey of 6,500 students in 27 diverse junior/community colleges. Among the major findings of the study were: (1) older students were less likely to experience academic problems than their college-age counterparts, tended to carry less heavy academic loads, and tended to be more motivated; (2) older students may need encouragement that higher aspirations are realistic; (3) program uncertainty seemed widespread among college-age students while only a few older students were uncertain about educational goals; (4) older students preferred instructor-centered instruction while college-age students preferred student-centered instruction; (5) college-age students were the most likely to feel unchallenged by their classes while students over 30 were six times as likely as students under 22 to be satisfied with instruction; and (6) older students generally spent more time studying than college-age students. The growing numbers of older students appear certain to require increased emphasis on quality of instruction and new approaches to counseling, particularly to help students budget time and balance their on- and off-campus roles. (Author/JDS)

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ED130737

REPRINTED FROM:

FINDINGS

ETS • Volume II • Number 1 • 1975

A quarterly of ETS research in postsecondary education

Teaching and Counseling Older College Students

Pamela J. Roelfs

People traditionally considered too old to go to college are beginning to go—and just when higher education needs them. This upward trend in student age, if it continues, seems certain to be accompanied by a shift in counseling needs and changing emphases in preferred instructional styles.

Among students enrolled in undergraduate programs, the number 22 and older has been rising slowly but steadily in recent years. From 1960 to 1970, the number of men students 22 to 34 doubled, and the number of women students in that age group tripled. In 1970, roughly one-third of all undergraduates were 22 or older. One-sixth were over 25 (1).

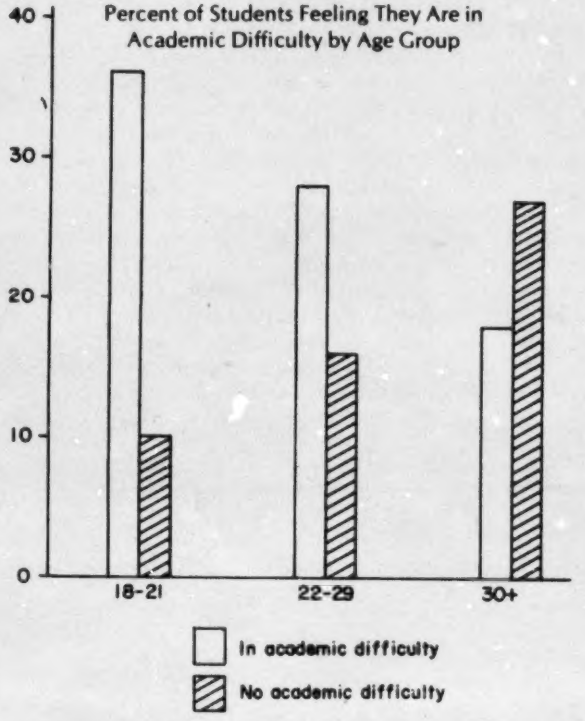
Late bloomers, lifelong learners, retrainees, job upgraders, veterans, housewives, senior citizens, dropouts—all are potential consumers of higher education. Colleges and universities faced with declining enrollments are turning to this largely untapped market. Among people 25 or older, there are 15 million college graduates, many of them ready for further professional training or intellectual development. There are also 71 million high school graduates who either never started or never finished college (2). Some 25 million people in this age group are already continuing their education on a part-time basis, but fewer than one in nine of them attends a college or university. In fact, only one-sixth of the people who express interest in further education look to universities and colleges for it (3).

How can higher education attract more of these older students? What policy issues face a college with an increasingly older student body? In the search for answers to these questions, it may be helpful to examine the college perceptions and experiences of students 22 and older, and compare them to those of younger students. Data for such comparisons were derived from the responses of some 6,500 students in 27 diverse junior and community colleges to a new questionnaire. Called *Student Reactions to College* (SRC), the instrument was designed by ETS to help two-year colleges assess student opinions of college programs and experiences (4).

These colleges were selected to include a variety of students and educational settings. Enrollments ranged from fewer than 500 to more than 17,000 students, with a mean enrollment of 4,500. Full-time students varied from 32 to 100 percent of enrollment, with one-third of the colleges reporting that more than half their students attended part-time. Evening students varied from none to 63 percent, and about half the colleges reported that one-fourth or more of their students were in the evening divisions. In such a diversity of educational settings, there are many students who traditionally have been thought too old for college.

Figure 1

Percent of Students Feeling They Are in Academic Difficulty by Age Group



In the spring of 1971, the students responded to an experimental version of SRC including more than 100 items related to academic experiences. Of those responding, 1,403 were in the 22-29 age group and 616 were 30 or older. Responses of these groups were compared with those of the nearly 4,500 younger students. Reactions in two areas—counseling needs and instructional preferences—varied clearly in relation to age group.

In the past, college counselors have spent considerable time with two types of students: those in academic difficulty, and those undecided about their college goals. Dealing with students over 22, counselors will encounter fewer who feel they are doing poorly in their studies and fewer who are uncertain about what to do with their lives after college.

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The data indicate that more than half the students in any age group feel they are doing neither very poorly nor very well with their academic work. As Figure 1 shows, some students do consider themselves in academic difficulty—left behind in a course, unable to comprehend what is being taught, having an instructor who explains things in a way they cannot understand. These students respond "yes," or "definitely yes," they have encountered all of these problems recently in their college experience. Other students report none of these problems.

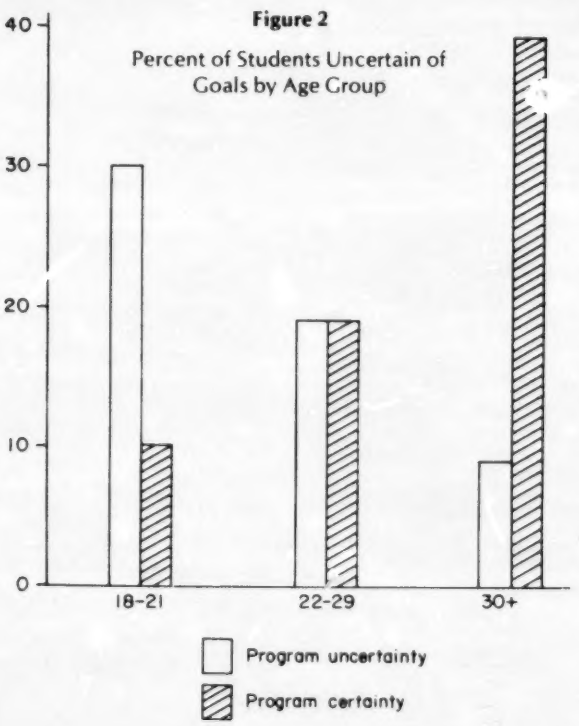
Older students, particularly those over 30, are less likely to experience academic problems. For example, only one in six students over 30 reports difficulty in all three areas mentioned above, compared to one in three aged 18-21. One reason for this difference may be that older students generally take lighter class loads. One-third of the respondents over 30 were enrolled for fewer than eight hours of credit. Similarly light loads were being carried by 13 percent of those aged 22-29, and only seven percent of the younger students. Older students, even those enrolled full-time in day courses, seem to register only for the courses they have time to prepare for and cover adequately. Perhaps their experience in work and home life has given them a realistic picture of their talents, physical stamina, and mental capabilities. Or perhaps they simply do not share the younger students' eagerness to hurry through college. In any case, college students over the age of 22 are a self-selected group; they usually attend college because they want to, not because parents or peers insist it is *the thing to do*.

It is not surprising, then, to find that older students are frequently well-motivated and good students. More than one-fourth of the students 30 and older, compared to only one-tenth of those 21 and younger, say they have no problems keeping up with coursework and understanding their instructors. The more serious counseling problem for some older students may be that they are underestimating their abilities and are overqualified for the programs in which they are enrolled. They may need encouragement and a reassuring push to convince them that higher aspirations are realistic.

The few older students who are in academic difficulty are likely to express concerns quite different from those of college-age students in similar trouble. The data indicate that younger students are often bitter about being advised by insensitive counselors, getting bad information about courses or programs, or being overloaded with too many required courses. Older students who do find themselves in academic difficulty tend to run out of time and energy preparing for class and studying for tests. For many of these students, counseling may involve persuading them to commit more time to college work.

Figure 2

Percent of Students Uncertain of Goals by Age Group



Older Students More Certain of Goals

Currently, a familiar student in the college counseling center is the one who is uncertain about educational and occupational goals. But the data indicate there are not many older students struggling with indecision. Most have charted courses of study for themselves before they begin college. The few—one-sixth of those aged 22-29, one-tenth of those 30 and older—who indicate a good deal of program uncertainty seem to feel comfortable having no definite college goals. These students apparently have no interest in work toward a degree and prefer taking occasional courses in subject areas that are of special professional or avocational interest.

In contrast, program uncertainty seems widespread among college-age students. Nearly one-third of those under 22 say they don't know what they want to do when they finish the two-year college and wonder whether the courses they're taking are what they really want. These students feel that, if they knew better what they wanted to do, they could get more out of college. (See Figure 2.)

Older students are much more likely to have definite post-college plans than students 21 or younger. Many older students come to college with specific learning goals in mind—upgrading job skills for promotion, maintaining state certification, learning a new marketable skill, or specializing in a subject of lifelong interest. Only 10 percent of the college-age students have a clear idea of why they are in a particular degree program. In contrast, 20 percent of the students aged 22-29, and 40 percent of those 30 and older, know what they want out of college.

There may be an increasing need for counseling expertise to deal with problems arising out of combining college, work, and family life. The once-typical student who lived on campus and depended on the college for all social and intellectual nourishment is fast disappearing. Now many students are commuters who have family responsibilities and full-time jobs and view college as one of several resources for personal and vocational development. Such students are particularly likely to be 22 or older.

In short, the growing numbers of adults returning to college are bringing with them differences of maturity and lifestyle that may call for new approaches to counseling. Situations that are now unusual on college campuses will become more commonplace: a professor teaching students older than he or she is; children being raised while

one or both parents are in school; a spouse working to put a wife or husband through college; an older person withdrawing from society to a campus cocoon; parent and child competing against each other in the same degree program.

In the area of instruction, there are many current experiments that place primary responsibility for learning on the student rather than the instructor. SRC data indicate that student-centered instruction(5)—instructors working out course content with students, organizing classes around informal discussions rather than texts or assignments, and following topics of student interest even if planned content is not covered—enjoys its greatest popularity among college-age students. One in five students under 22, but only one in 10 over 30, would like class structure and course content arranged in these ways.

Among younger students who prefer student-centered instruction, the pattern of responses suggests there are at least two distinct types of preference. Some younger students want responsibility for their own academic development and freedom from instructor demands in fulfilling course requirements, even if it takes more work. Others have a mixture of self-reliance and dependence, wanting the course shaped to accommodate their desires but also relying on out-of-class help from the instructor and/or other students.

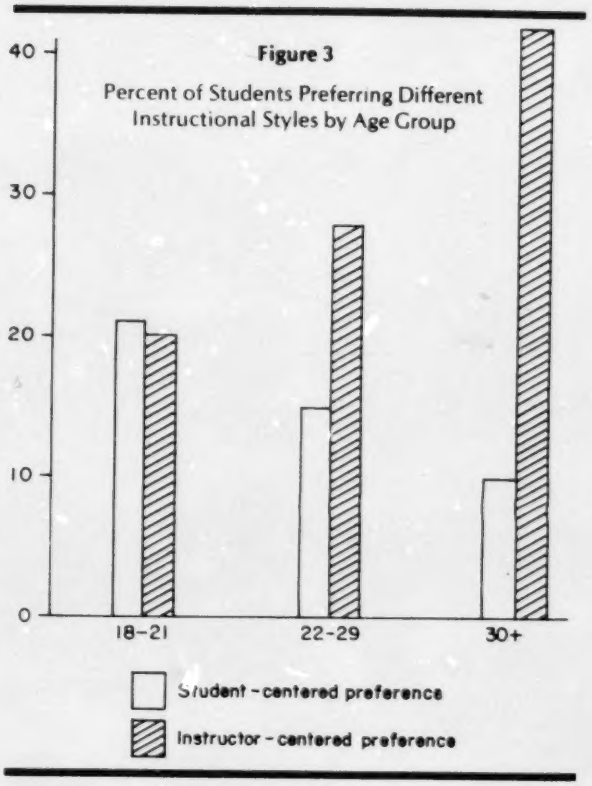
Among the few older students who are student-centered, behavior seems similar to that of typical college-age students. For example, while older students generally have few problems keeping up academically, those who prefer student-centered instruction frequently find it hard to concentrate on homework, and they take time from one course to catch up in another.

While contacts with other students outside class are infrequent among students in the older age groups, the 10 percent over 30 who are student-centered in instructional preferences tend to carry this orientation into out-of-class activities as well. They are much more likely than most students over 30 to socialize with, and seek academic help from, other students. More than half these older student-centered students are veterans, who may have grown accustomed to group learning and living situations in military service.

Older Students Prefer Old-Style Classes

Preference for instructor-centered instruction, where the teacher determines course content and learning activities and generally uses class periods for lectures, is much more prevalent among older students. (See Figure 3.) Some 42 percent of those 30 and older, compared to 20 percent of the college-age students, react negatively to the idea of student-centered classes. Some comments by older students responding to the SRC questionnaire illustrate their opposition to student-centered instruction:

- *I have learned to dislike informal teacher-student sessions. They're usually a waste of time.*
- *These loose-type classes are used to cop out to get an easy grade.*
- *Courses have to be standardized. There's time enough to go off on one's interests in graduate school.*
- *Teachers are the ones who know what to teach—they've been taught that.*



Student opinions of how well instructors present course material seem to vary with age group, too. SRC data indicate college-age students are the most likely to feel unchallenged by their classes. Almost 90 percent of those 18-21 feel bored in at least one class during any two-week period. More than 40 percent of them say they are bored many times in class. Older students complain less frequently of boredom. Fewer than half of them report being bored in any class, and fewer than 10 percent report frequent instances of boredom.

Being generally dissatisfied with classes—not only being bored, but finding nothing new in the material covered and regarding the instructor's contribution as no help—is much more common among college-age students than among those 30 and older. Students over 30 are six times as likely as students under 22 to be satisfied with instruction.

In every age group, dissatisfaction with classes is related to the number of courses being taken and the length of time on campus. Greater dissatisfaction is voiced by those with heavier class loads and those who are further along in college. And dissatisfied students, regardless of age, tend to feel that faculty members are inaccessible outside of class and do not understand student problems.

The reasons for feeling unchallenged or dissatisfied, however, do vary with age. Among students 18-21, the 43 percent who feel unchallenged tend to prefer student-centered instruction and be confused about educational objectives. More than a third of these students—compared to one-fourth of the general college population—drop a course each term because it is not giving them what they want. Eighty-five percent of the college-age students who are dissatisfied with their classes wonder whether they are taking the courses they really want.

Older unchallenged students—one-third of those 22-29 and one-sixth of those over 30—appear to be relatively bright, conscientious, and efficient in their studies. The ones over 30 are especially interested in continuing their education beyond the community college. They inquire, at three times the rate of satisfied students in their age group, about four-year college and graduate school possibilities.

Older students generally spend more time studying than college-age students, but the dissatisfied ones over 30 are particularly likely to study many evenings—even when they do not feel they have to. Nearly three-fourths of this group study a half day or more on several weekends each term. They spend twice as many weekends and evenings studying as college-age students who feel unchallenged.

Data from the SRC questionnaire lead to some interesting speculations about teaching older or younger classes. Consider a class of 20 students, all under 22. It is likely that only one in the class will express great satisfaction with what he or she is learning from the instructor. Eight class members probably will indicate they are frequently bored or unchallenged by the material presented or by the instructor's handling of it. These students would prefer spending their time in more active learning roles—study sessions or spontaneous discussions with fellow students and the faculty.

If that same class of 20 were composed of students in their 30s or older, it is likely that at least five of them would be pleased with classroom instruction and would have no complaints about materials or instructor contributions. Three might feel unchallenged, and frequently bored, but they would not be interested in active class learning roles for themselves. Instead, they would be well prepared for class and critical of the quality of teaching. In fact, they might suggest that the instructor move through the materials at a faster pace or on a more sophisticated level.

Students 22 and older clearly have counseling needs and instructional preferences that differ in many ways from those of college-age students. Thus the growing numbers of older students appear certain to require increased emphasis on the quality of instruction and new approaches to counseling, particularly to help students budget their time and balance their roles on and off the campus.

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FINDINGS

Published quarterly by
Educational Testing Service
Princeton, NJ 08540

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